Modernism's Traffic-Sense

ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

—Ezra Pound

Recent work in modernist studies has taken a keen interest in crossings of various kinds: transgressions, transitions, borders, hybridities. This essay concentrates on the rather more mundane (but no less modern) experience of crossing the street in heavy traffic. Such quotidian crossings might seem unremarkable when set against other, more spectacular, encounters with traffic — motor-accidents, for instance, have a well-established place in modernist scholarship — but in the early years of the twentieth century they were still perilous enough, and unfamiliar enough, to demand attention.[1] By 1926 Robert Graves could identify an awareness of traffic as one of several new 'senses' fostered by or foisted on modernity, all of which had served in his view to diminish the audience for poetry: 'The public which is acquiring a short-story sense and a film-sense and a traffic-sense and a radio-sense is neither dull nor lazy [...] but it happens that poetry is no longer in fashion, and the poetry-sense has not been cultivated correspondingly with the other senses'.[2]

Graves's 'traffic-sense' might be thought to sit slightly oddly in the middle of this list of incontrovertibly modern media, as if 'traffic' were itself a cultural form with particular communicative potentials and resistances rather than a set of mobile and life-threatening

obstacles to be avoided. Instead of emphasising sudden sensory interruption, the association of traffic with new media stresses the new forms of competence — of sensory adaptation — that such innovations demanded. One thing traffic has in common with short stories, radio, and film is its demand for an alteration in the modality of attention brought to bear by a perceiving subject. Each of these forms was widely understood to require particular kinds of mental and physical attunement: whether a brief but intense concentration (as in the short story), an aural decoupling allowing for the simultaneous performance of other activities (as in the radio), or a gaze figured as passively receptive (as in the cinema). Before they mediate messages, such new media mediate attention itself. Redirected into a variety of such new 'senses', attention is reconfigured as a process of subject-formation rather than an innate property of already-existing subjects, and a reflexive attentiveness to the nature of attention becomes, as Jonathan Crary puts it, 'a sign, not so much of the subject's disappearance as of its precariousness, contingency, and insubstantiality'.[3]

Rather than a shocking interruption, I want to argue, modernism's traffic-sense is best understood as the operation of a dialectic involving the inculcation of habit and the shaping of attentiveness. This in turn tells us something about the precariousness of modern subjects, who find themselves caught between (or, with a different emphasis, produced by) the competing imperatives of automatism and self-awareness. To possess traffic-sense is thus to exist in a state of oscillation between confidence and wariness, to cultivate an everyday form of the dissociation or double-consciousness that to many modernist writers seemed characteristic of their own historical and cultural condition. For them, traffic was no longer merely a danger to be noticed and avoided. It became instead a new medium, one that every citizen would soon be obliged — however precariously — to inhabit.

Kerbside

In a survey of popular paintings for *The Strand Magazine* in 1901, the actor and art critic Rudolph de Cordova gamely worked his way through thirty years' worth of *fin-de-siècle* eye-candy — scenes sentimental and heroic, religious pictures and Pre-Raphaelite icons — before turning to a print whose outlandish success had surprised even its publishers. 'It is questionable,' he wrote, 'whether any plate has, in the same time, had a greater vogue than that of "His Majesty the Baby"'.[4] The picture, a chocolate-boxy piece by Arthur Drummond, shows a cherubic Fauntleroy, rosy of cheek and golden of curl, being led across a busy street by his nurse, while in the background an obliging policeman stems the flow of bicycles, carriages and omnibuses. Drummond's painting had proved such a hit with the public that reproductions were soon being sold across Europe, North America, and the Empire. It even came to the attention of Sigmund Freud, who in his 1914 essay 'On Narcissism' alludes, giving the title in English, to 'the centre and core of creation — "His Majesty the Baby", as we once fancied ourselves' [*fig. 1*].[5]

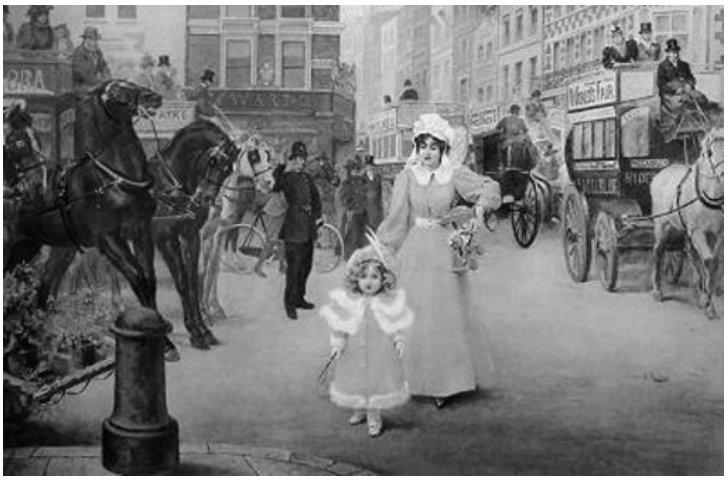

fig. 1. Arthur Drummond, 'His Majesty the Baby'

'The scene represented in "His Majesty the Baby",' according to de Cordova, 'is the corner of Piccadilly where Old Bond Street runs into it, and it is a faithful presentation of the spot'. The junction was notorious. At the turn of the century, the rapid increase of road traffic in London was beginning to be recognised as a pressing problem, and Piccadilly became a focus of public displeasure. The plight of the pedestrian caught in the midst of all this became a staple topic for letters and leaders in the major newspapers. It also became a rich resource for their cartoonists, of whom the most consistently traffic-obsessed was the *Daily Mirror*'s W.K. Haselden. A 1906 Haselden cartoon shows a well-dressed Edwardian couple marooned on a traffic island while horse-drawn carriages jostle around them and motor-omnibuses squash luckless passers-by: 'Farewell, dearest. I may get across safely, but if I don't I have the satisfaction of knowing I leave you well provided for!' Another, from the following year, wonders, 'Would Hercules himself have crossed the road at Piccadilly Circus?', while a third, from 1908, suggests a variety of technological fixes ranging from zip-lines and catapults to stilts and blow-up 'never-mind-being-run-over' suits [*figs* 2, 3, 4]. In 1905, a Royal Commission reported that between 1881 and 1901 the number of rail, tram, and omnibus journeys *per capita* within Greater London

had increased by more than 127 per cent. Congestion was endemic. Observers on Piccadilly recorded 20,474 vehicles passing between the hours of 8am and 8pm, with delays totalling 3 hours, 41.4 minutes East-West and 1 hour, 47.3 minutes North-South.[6]

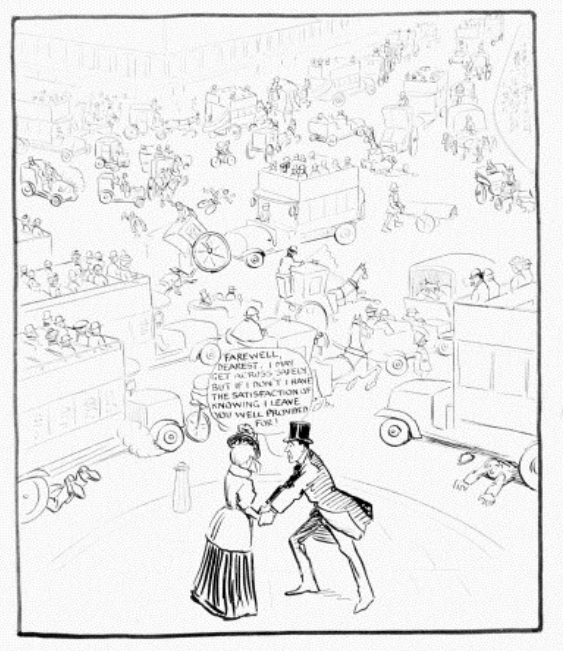

fig. 2. 'Farewell, dearest!'

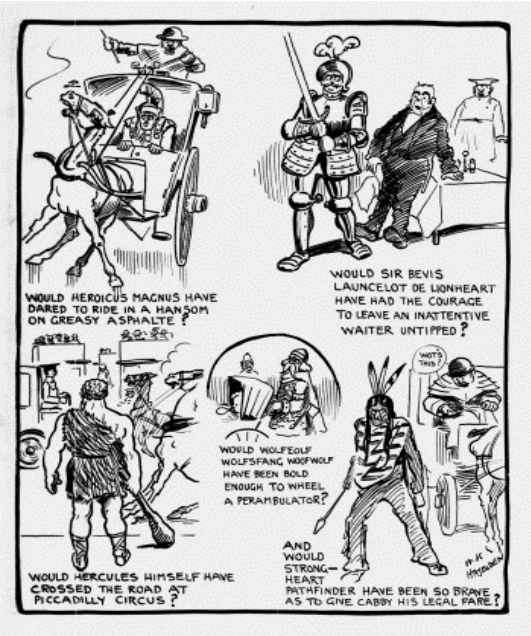

fig. 3. Hercules at Piccadilly

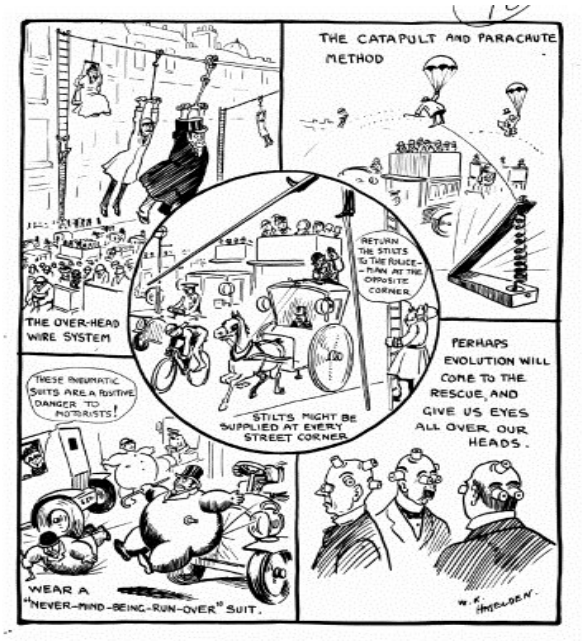

fig. 4. Traffic precautions

Despite the Commission's report, the problem rumbled on. Relentless traffic unsettles Charles Marlow in Conrad's *Chance* (1914) when he has to save his friend Mr Fyne from a close brush with a pair of oncoming cart-horses. Fyne, though a practiced distance-walker in the fields of the Home Counties — 'this [...] notable pedestrian' is the epithet bestowed upon him by Marlow — is unaccustomed to the different requirements of metropolitan pedestrianism. But he is also distracted. Having failed to dissuade his young protégée Flora de Barral from eloping with the mariner Captain Anthony, Fyne proves less than attentive to the rhythms of urban walking. 'He skipped wildly out of the way and up on the curbstone with a purely instinctive precision; his mind had nothing to do with his movements. In the middle of his leap, and while in the act of sailing gravely through the air, he continued to relieve his outraged feelings'.[7]

'Sailing gravely through the air' is a subtle but effective bit of Conradian (or Marlovian) drollery: the downward tug of 'gravely' substitutes for the expected uplift of 'gracefully' in a way that makes gentle fun of the rather earnest Mr Fyne. But gravity and grace aren't the only pair of opposing forces between which Fyne finds himself suspended. For Fyne is perhaps less wild than Marlow thinks, or at least more modern. His narrow escape owes less to his attentiveness than to his instinct; what's more, the physical leap he makes in no way interrupts the flow of verbal outrage. Fyne is both wild and precise, grave and graceful, distracted and attentive. He is distracted from paying attention to the traffic *because* he is paying attention to his outrage, yet that canalization of conscious attention appears to liberate Fyne's body to work instinctively: 'his mind had nothing to do with his movements'.

Dissociation of this kind had become a common literary response to the traffic problem. In the same year, *The Egoist* published a series of poems by the American poet John Gould Fletcher

under the general title *London Excursion*. One poem in the sequence, 'Transposition', offers an Imagist's account of crossing the street:

> A million forces ignore me, I know not why,
> I am drunken with it all.
> Suddenly I feel an immense will
> Stored up hitherto and unconscious till this instant,
> Projecting my body
> Across a street, in the face of all its traffic.
>
> I dart and dash:
> I do not know why I go.
> These people watch me,
> I yield them my adventure.[8]

Like Haselden's cartoons, Fletcher's 'Transposition' turns crossing the road into a heroic accomplishment. As the pedestrian takes on the mantle of adventurer, his encounter with the stream of traffic becomes both a moment of performance, in which the hitherto ignored body of the man in the crowd breaks free to become the object of temporarily concentrated attention, and an occasion for the manifestation of unconscious drives. Tempting as it is to construe the poem as a piece of nostalgic Baudelairean *flânerie*, Fletcher seems to deny even the possibility of such casual composure in the busy capitals of the twentieth century. The congested London of 1914 presents the walker with a stark choice: wedge yourself dully into the pavement crowd, or try to regain some conscious control by way of a daring (if distinctly un-*flâneur*-ish) dash into the passing traffic. 'I do not heed the city any more,' observes another poem in the sequence: 'It has given me a duty to perform. / I pass along nonchalantly, / Insinuating myself into self-baffling movements.' The city has become not a set of signs to be read and interpreted, but a set of directives that sets the self against the self.

Fletcher's speaker registers surprise at the way the body seems, in such situations, to be commanded by the unconscious, bypassing rational thought. But he also gets an undeniable kick from that short circuit, which simulates or flirts with a form of dissociation stopping just short of mania. Were his excursion Parisian, one might be tempted to diagnose a case of *automatisme ambulatoire*, that celebrated medical condition into which the wanderings of the Second Empire *flâneur* had been turned by the military-psychiatric complex of the Third Republic.[9] In unpsychiatric London, the traffic alone was more than enough to drive anyone to distraction.

Not all pedestrians were as thoroughly liberated as Fyne or as thoroughly self-baffled as Fletcher, but many did find themselves at a standstill. 'Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself'. No sooner has she walked out of her front door, however, than the traffic brings her to an abrupt halt:

> She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.[10]

It is precisely when Clarissa Dalloway is thus brought up short that *Mrs. Dalloway* begins to make a point of its own narrative mobility. In the novel's first three paragraphs, Woolf's celebrated free indirect style has made free with Clarissa's own thoughts; now, however, it shifts so that we see Clarissa as her next-door neighbour Scrope Purvis sees her, waiting on the kerb for an opportunity to cross. A moment of stillness gives rise to a sudden perspectival transition between sentences, and this pause has less to do with Clarissa's habituation to the rhythms of city traffic than with the reader's habituation to the innovative movements of Woolf's prose.

For the minor difficulty experienced by Clarissa in crossing the road masks the far greater formal difficulty that the novel overcomes in passing from one mind to another. Clarissa's moment of hesitation enables the fluid movement of the narrative voice away from her point of view to that of another consciousness and its return after the thoroughfare has cleared. Traffic, in the shape of the passing van, provides the pretext for the disarticulations and rearticulations of the narrative.

Woolf revised this opening passage carefully when she carried it across from the seed story 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street'. There, Clarissa's crossing trouble is emphasised by contrast with the urchin who darts out ahead of her. The narrative remains with Clarissa's thoughts, rather than using her bodily immobility to reveal the contrasting mobility of the narrative voice as in the novel's revision of the scene: 'Poor little wretches, she sighed, and pressed forward. Oh, right under the horses' noses, you little demon! and there she was left on the kerb stretching her hand out, while Jimmy Dawes grinned on the further side'.[11] If the short story implies a difference in attunement or habituation between a woman of Clarissa's generation and a boy of Jimmy's, the later version suggests a slightly more confident Clarissa. And Clarissa in turn is more street-wise than some of her predecessors: consider Mrs. Ambrose, who in the opening scene of an earlier novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), waits a full 'minute or two' for a break in the traffic on the Embankment: 'with a stoical gaze she twitched her husband's sleeve, and they crossed between the swift discharge of motor cars.' In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf feels it necessary to notice that the Ambroses arrive 'safe on the further side'.[12] By 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street', it goes without saying.

The significant point here is that Woolf was aware of traffic not merely as a nuisance or even as a contemporary *cause célèbre*, but as an opportunity for innovation in narrative form. Her

traffic-sense, to borrow Graves's term, can be seen developing from one novel, one short story, to another. In order for that to be possible, the negotiation of traffic had to become a matter internal to consciousness rather than a response to external signals such as those of the policeman idealized in 'His Majesty the Baby', or his colleague who appears a little later in 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street':

> Omnibuses joined motor cars; motor cars vans; vans taxicabs, taxicabs motor cars — here was an open motor car with a girl, alone. Up till four, her feet tingling, I know, thought Clarissa, for the girl looked washed out, half asleep, in the corner of the car after the dance. And another car came; and another. No! No! No! Clarissa smiled good-naturedly. The fat lady had taken every sort of trouble, but diamonds! orchids! at this hour of the morning! No! No! No! The excellent policeman would, when the time came, hold up his hand. Another motor car passed. How utterly unattractive! Why should a girl of that age paint black round her eyes? And a young man, with a girl, at this hour, when the country— The admirable policeman raised his hand and Clarissa acknowledging his sway, taking her time, crossed, walked towards Bond Street; saw the narrow crooked street, the yellow banners; the thick notched telegraph wires stretched across the sky.[13]

'No! No! No!' It isn't possible to decide whether those exclamatory 'No!'s form the content of Clarissa's thoughts as she waits to cross, or whether they belong to the narrative itself. (We aren't told whether Clarissa *thinks* 'No!' in the same way she thinks 'I know' when she looks at the girl in the car, or whether 'No!' is a linguistic representation of a purely instinctive sensory response.) The repeated interdiction marks a discursive boundary, a crossing-place where instinct may or may not make the transition into conscious thought. For Woolf, writing about road-crossing became a way of writing about those other, more obscure, transitions between instinctive bodies and thinking minds. Three cars in the first section elicit three instinctive exclamations; but the 'No! No! No!' which follows on from another exclamation — 'at this hour of the morning! — is also associated with Clarissa's thoughts about the exhausted revellers she sees. The answering authorization comes in Woolf's 1930 essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', but in such a way that permission becomes indistinguishable from compulsion.

> But we are come to the Strand now, and as we hesitate on the curb, a little rod about the length of one's finger begins to lay its bar across the velocity and abundance of life. 'Really I must — really I must' — that

> is it. Without investigating the demand, the mind cringes to the accustomed tyrant. One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself.[14]

Traffic, in Woolf, seems always to prompt the thought that freedom can impose its own forms of constraint, and constraint its own forms of liberty.

It has become common to think of walking as a way of understanding mental activity, and *vice versa.* Rebecca Solnit, a notable pedestrian of our own time, suggests that the 'rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts'.[15] If this is true, then the rhythms of *interrupted* walking, of the walk held up at the kerbside, should elicit a different kind of thinking, and a different kind of form, than those associated with continuous unimpeded movement. Such thinking would perhaps register not what Solnit calls a 'consonance between internal and external passage', but an awareness, as in Woolf, that some kinds of dissonance between bodily movement and the movement of the mind can prove equally thought-provoking.

Criticism is one kind of thought that such dissonances seem to provoke. The girl with kohl-rimmed eyes, the fat lady with her orchids, and the young couple in their cars constitute the traffic that hinders Clarissa's progress, but that hindrance itself becomes the occasion for sustained attention giving rise to a judgment. Crossings in *Mrs. Dalloway* frequently turn idle thoughts towards disapproval, as when Clarissa's husband Richard waits to cross Piccadilly:

> [H]e repeated that it was a miracle that he should have married Clarissa; a miracle — his life had been a miracle, he thought; hesitating to cross. But it did make his blood boil to see little creatures of five or six crossing Piccadilly alone. The police ought to have stopped the traffic at once. He had no illusions about the London police. Indeed, he was collecting evidence of their malpractices [...].[16]

What has happened to the admirable policeman of a few years earlier, that obliging figure who clears the thoroughfare for "little creatures" like His Majesty the Baby and for ambulatory ladies like Clarissa Dalloway? Where is the helpful crossing-guard when Peter Walsh, hearing the 'light high bell' of a passing ambulance thinks instinctively of 'some one hit on the head, struck down by disease, knocked over perhaps a minute or so ago at one of these crossings, as might happen to oneself'? Biography suggests one possible answer. In April 1924, while Woolf was turning 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street' into *Mrs. Dalloway*, a motorist knocked down her niece Angelica along with the girl's nurse. Nursemaids accompanied by His (or Her) Majesty the Baby were no longer assured of safe passage. The nurse, Louie Everest, suffered only minor injuries, but Angelica's condition was grave. Having rushed to the Middlesex Hospital, Virginia, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant were warned that she might not survive. In the end, she made a full recovery, but there is evidence enough to suggest that the accident left its mark on Woolf's writing. There are no excellent or admirable policemen to be found in *Mrs. Dalloway.*

Motor Control

Richard Dalloway was not the only Londoner who felt that the situation had got out of hand. In December 1924, as Angelica lay recovering and Woolf continued revising her drafts, a new London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee convened for the first time with the aim of sorting out the London traffic problem. Over three days, *The Times* ran a commentary by Sir Lynden Macassey, who had served as secretary to the previous commission in 1903-06. Having enumerated possible improvements that could be made — one-way streets, licensing of

omnibuses, regulated cab ranks, better organization of road-works — Macassey turned in his final instalment to 'The Pedestrian':

> It may reasonably be questioned whether pedestrians should be allowed to stroll across important London streets at any point they please, or whether they should not be restricted to crossing the street at definite points. [...] Why should one or two persons crossing Regent-street be permitted to delay all vehicular traffic proceeding up or down that street by daring the drivers of vehicles to run over them? [...] One pressing matter with which the new Committee must deal is that of crossing traffic. It is one of the chief causes of congestion.[17]

Several measures recommended by the committee were quickly adopted, including the introduction of a one-way system in parts of central London, and the use of 'crossing-over' places. On 22 April 1927, *The Times* noted that these 'crossing-over' places' had certainly helped to make the streets safer, though it also condemned pedestrians who 'err through ignorance or nervousness' and noted their failure to adapt to the new one-way system.[18]

Even here, however, it proved difficult to explain what was actually expected. On the one hand, ignorance and nervousness were to be condemned; pedestrians had to learn to go by instinct. The paper borrowed an old traffic slogan that had first been promulgated in the 1900s by the Combined Omnibus Company, insisting that 'He who thinks, in modern traffic, is lost; until pedestrians act as "unconsciously" as do all good drivers they must remain in danger'.[19] On the other hand, as the paper had noted a few weeks earlier:

> The walker is doing something which he learned to do in infancy and has been doing ever since: he is using the means of progression which has been normal in his kind for countless ages. The driver of a motor-car must be thinking of his car all the time. The walker walks instinctively, and his mind is free to think of anything else that may be in it.[20]

Pedestrians, it seemed, had to manage the feat not just of being alternately attentive and instinctive, but of synthesizing the two into the kind of reverie which, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, gives modern consciousness a new form. Woolf's fiction is intimately aware of such reveries as early as *The Voyage Out*, which begins — after the Ambroses' successful crossing of the Embankment — with a shipboard dinner-party where the female guests are 'highly trained in promoting men's talk without listening to it', and can therefore let their minds dwell on more important matters such as 'the education of children' or 'the use of fog sirens in an opera'.[21] But it is not until *Mrs. Dalloway* that the connection is made between a body stalled before traffic and a narrative freed to go its own way.

This is perhaps the kind of thing James Wood has in mind when he suggests that 'Woolf [...] introduced absent-mindedness — in all senses of the phrase — to English fiction'.[22] He may be right. Wyndham Lewis seems to have thought so too, but was less sure that absent-mindedness could ever be a desirable quality. His Bloomsbury satire *The Apes of God* (1930) comes to an end during the General Strike of 1926, when the empty streets reveal traffic-sense as the form of automatism it had become. The novel's would-be artist, Dan Boleyn, finds the deserted thoroughfares every bit as disconcerting as Piccadilly at rush hour. 'To be on the safe side he stood upon the curb until there was absolutely nothing in sight. There was no one near him and nothing in the street. Then he crossed'.[23] The dig at perched, poised figures like Clarissa Dalloway is clear enough. For Lewis, it is a sign of Dan's unthinking subjection to modern machine-culture that he has to look both ways before crossing an empty street. His lack of traffic-sense (his excess of traffic-consciousness) is not exemplified by the usual antics of the foolish pedestrian, but rather by the fact that he has allowed habit to condition all of his sensory responses. When it comes to road-crossing, Dan doubts that there ever *is* a safe side. Traffic troubles him even when it isn't there.

But the satirical effect depends on a misrepresentation. What had in Woolf been only *semi*-automatic takes on, in Lewis, the outward semblance of a pure automatism. The relentless exteriority on which Lewis prided himself — '[f]or *The Apes of God* it could, I think, quite safely be claimed that no book has ever been written that paid more attention to the *outside* of people' — takes no interest in transitions of consciousness, but only in the arrangement of bodies in space, stripped of any subjectivity that might integrate their absurd motions into a meaningful pattern of thought.[24]

Not many interwar writers were as passionate about minds as Woolf, or as wild about bodies as Lewis. Indeed, some novels of the period take good traffic-sense as the sure sign of a well-adjusted modern temperament; to lack it, on the other hand, is to be anachronistic, absurd, or merely gauche. In Patrick Hamilton's *The Midnight Bell* (1929), the bartender Bob finds while courting the prostitute Jenny that his 'optimistic consciousness' is 'temporarily diverted' by the 'problem of evading the traffic, in the middle of Coventry Street'. No harm comes to them: Bob, Jenny, and Bob's optimistic consciousness make it across unscathed. Later in the same novel-sequence, however, Hamilton describes a similar scene in a quite different mood, as the odious pub bore Ernest Eccles finds his erotic advances on the barmaid Ella foundering in mid-crossing:

> This was always one she dreaded, as it was a tricky corner even for those who did not lose their heads, and Mr. Eccles today behaved more like someone in a padded cell than someone in a public thoroughfare, pushing her forward, dragging her back like a shying horse, epileptically clasping her lest she made a move, and finally, when they were over, laying all the blame on her with 'It's better really to make up one's mind from the beginning, isn't it?'[25]

The difference between these two scenes, between Bob's ability to be only temporarily diverted and Eccles's nervous self-consciousness, is a measure of relative traffic-sense. To have *real* traffic-sense, then, would be to negotiate traffic while appearing never to think of it at all. Perhaps the fullest development of that sense in modern times is to be seen in the improvisational elegance of Chaplin's Tramp, who, in *City Lights* (1931), finding himself blocked in mid-street by a parked limousine, doesn't think twice before opening the roadside door and suavely making his way through to the pavement. In such a figure perfect motor control — in both senses — becomes indistinguishable from unconscious simplicity, so that the conjunction of the two constitutes a kind of charisma in its own right.

Traffic Signals

The kind of sensory semi-autonomy described by Woolf and mastered by Chaplin would seem at first to tally with Walter Benjamin's theory that modern culture directs its efforts towards addressing the absent-minded masses. 'Tactile appropriation', Benjamin writes in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1939), 'is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. [...] Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. [...] The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one'.[26] No philosopher has ever taken more seriously the phenomenon of traffic than the author of *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*). But Benjamin was firmly committed to the idea that traffic, like advertising and shop windows, was best understood as an aspect of the fractured visual field presented by the city to a moving observer. Earlier in the same essay, he quotes with approval the sociologist Georg Simmel's observation that 'traffic in the metropolis, compared with that in small towns, assigns infinitely more importance to seeing

others than to hearing them',[27] and another work of the same period, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), makes the connections between traffic, shock, and vision explicit:

> Haptic experiences [such as placing a telephone call or taking a photograph] were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. [...] Whereas Poe's passers-by cast glances in all directions, seemingly without cause, today's pedestrians are obliged to look about them so that they can be aware of traffic signals.[28]

For Benjamin, vision was at the root of modernism's traffic-sense. But even those who lacked access to optical experience were transformed by traffic. It is no coincidence that when Chaplin's Tramp emerges from the parked limousine he steps into his first encounter with the blind flower-seller whose sight he will later go to such lengths to restore. Fixed to the street corner, set apart from the rapidly moving life of the city, she embodies an immobility that contrasts sharply with his gracefully insouciant negotiation of the roadway. She stops him in his tracks as traffic never could.

For obvious reasons, traffic constituted a particular problem for those sightless pedestrians to whom the signals observed by Benjamin were of little use. According to some accounts, the internationally-recognised white cane was first used in 1921 by a visually-impaired Bristol photographer, James Biggs, who having grown alarmed by the increasing density and speed of urban traffic took it upon himself to alert drivers and other pedestrians to his presence and his condition by brandishing an eye-catching white walking stick.[29] Biggs's innovation may have turned a mobility device into a visibility device, but the blind man's cane had so firm an association with visual impairment that it had even become a reliable prop for urban con-men. In Selwyn Weston's story 'The Failure', published in *The Freewoman* (a precursor of *The Egoist*) in 1912, a passer-by watches as a good Samaritan leads a blind man across the street

through ‘thickly moving traffic’. Safe on the other side, the blind man begs a coin, and the Samaritan turns donor with a movement the narrator interprets as ‘spontaneous, unreasoned, born of long habit’. Money changes hands. Once the generous docent has moved away, however, the narrator watches as the supposedly blind man looks down at his prize with obvious glee. Resolving to alert the victim of the scam, the narrator follows, only to discover that the other party is himself a blind man, though one with a highly-developed traffic-sense for all that: ‘So firm was his tread, so unwavering his walk, that I could not readily believe that *he* was blind’.[30]

Such figures, who despite their sensory impairment manage to sense what their sighted peers can’t, tread confidently through the modernist canon. In the ‘Lestrygonians’ section of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom offers help to a ‘blind stripling’ trying to cross Dawson Street, half-way between Trinity College and St Stephen’s Green. To Bloom the road looks empty — ‘Do you want to cross? There's nothing in the way’ — but the blind man has a different sense of the traffic. Following the line of his pointing cane, Bloom sees a delivery van parked outside Drago’s hairdressing shop. Bloom takes the man’s hand and they cross:

> Mr Bloom walked behind the eyeless feet, a flatcut suit of herringbone tweed. Poor young fellow! How on earth did he know that van was there? Must have felt it. See things in their forehead perhaps: kind of sense of volume. Weight or size of it, something blacker than the dark. Wonder would he feel it if something was removed. Feel a gap.[31]

Optical Bloom marvels at the stripling’s proprioceptive capacities, as well he might. Yet his attempts to make sense of that marvel are hopelessly embedded in optical metaphors: ‘See things’; ‘blacker than the dark’. Bloom, in the end, has no idea how the phenomenon of traffic affects a sightless consciousness, or how to think himself into a condition of sensory deprivation

('Feel a gap'). The physical crossing proves straightforward enough, but the crossing from one consciousness to another is not (yet) the effect that Joyce is aiming for.

The same situation, or something like it, is rehearsed in a more recent novel where blindness, road-crossing, and a highly unconventional prose style combine in such a way as to revive the modernist interest in traffic as a mediating phenomenon, one that shapes narrative by offering resistance to established rhythms of thought and expression. In *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), James Kelman inverts the Joycean scenario so that instead of being party to the thoughts of a sighted guide we are party to the thoughts of a blind man, Sammy Samuels, an unemployed Glaswegian labourer who has lost his sight in the course of a beating from the local police. Without his vision, without even a cane, Sammy has to rely on a stranger to help him cross the busy street outside the police station:

> Give us yer arm then... The guy took it and waited a wee minute then he started and he led Sammy right off the pavement and the way he went it didnay seem in a straight line and ye wondered if he was working his way in and out moving vehicles and hadnay even bothered to wait for the lights to change if there were lights there it was fucking murder no knowing where he was taking ye and ye might kick into the guy's heels and then yez would both take a tumble; just nay control at all really and ye wanted to take wee toty steps but ye couldnay cause ye had to move ye had to keep going, ye had to do it proper, and Sammy was feart to open his mouth in case the guy lost his concentration or else took the needle and just left him there and fuckt off in the huff man it sounded like it was busy, the junction, it was quite busy, the Napier Street traffic, he could hear it[32]

Denied visual cues of the kind that both make and mark modern road-crossings (just as the reader is denied punctuation such as the full stop that might otherwise end the paragraph), Sammy is thrown back into the chaos of traffic as a formless mental space. Propulsive, compulsive syntax enacts the difficulty of enduring that predicament; to read here is to be caught with Sammy between nervous hesitation ('ye wanted to take wee toty steps') and the obligation to press on ('ye had to keep going'). That tension is the pretext for Kelman's

concatenated, accretive prose just as surely as Clarissa Dalloway's enforced stillness is the pretext for Woolf's free indirect style.

Between Bloom's well-meaning attempt to help his fellow man and Sammy's anxious submission to an unknown guide lies a gap between different sense-worlds that can only be experienced from one side or another within the formal limits that those novels set for themselves. But there also lies a gap of years in which technology had transformed the relationship between the thinking (or unthinking) pedestrian and the flow of traffic. By the early 1930s, solutions had already been found to some kinds of traffic-related awkwardness. The introduction of automatic traffic lights — or 'traffic robots' as they were initially called — caught the attention of Bloomsbury. One might have expected Woolf to welcome such measures, and perhaps she did. There is no reason, after all, to attribute to her the view of the dinner-party guest who, at the beginning of her essay on Walter Sickert, complains that 'in the eyes of a motorist red is not a colour but simply a danger signal'.[33] But it was Joyce who was to take a celebratory interest in that more pedestrian-focused measure, the zebra crossing. The Minister for Transport, Leslie Hore-Belisha, had bequeathed his name to the 'Belisha beacons' which marked these rights-of-way. 'Belisha beacon, beckon bright!' implores Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), 'Usherette, unmesh us!'.[34] Such developments suggested how the technological mess that traffic produced could be alleviated, at least for a while, by technological measures. But the forms of attentiveness it produced had already been woven into the mesh of modernism. As Graves realized, traffic had become one of modernity's transformative media.

In claiming traffic as a medium I have in mind the shift in that term's set of meanings from early modern usage — where a 'medium' can describe either 'a pervading or enveloping substance' (in which entities might be sustained) or 'an intervening substance' (through which

entities might interact) — to its contemporary application in describing systems whose primary purpose is to store and transmit information. This 'specialized capitalist sense', as Raymond Williams calls it, 'in which a newspaper or broadcasting service — something that already exists or can be planned — is seen as a medium for something else, such as advertising', became current during the late nineteenth-century communications boom, and gradually displaced the earlier notion of a medium as 'a substance intermediate between a sense or a thought and its operation or expression'.[35] Modernism's traffic-sense, as I have been describing it, stands on the cusp of that transition from intervening substance to uninterrupted content.

Traffic can be considered a medium in that it describes an intervening process in the conveyance of objects or signals from one place to another, but also — and more compellingly — because such processes, infinitely replicated, permeate and environ the daily life of modernity. The traffic that connects us also impedes and surrounds us; we dwell, move, and think in and around its patterns of flow, congestion, and stoppage. If twentieth-century technology was to turn 'traffic' into a term for anything communicated from one place to another, however material or immaterial, most of the writers considered here were still inclined to regard traffic as an impediment to be negotiated by an embodied consciousness. Whether they found themselves moving with traffic or attempting to traverse it, they were never willing to dismiss it as an insignificant stage in the communication of significant contents. Traffic was precisely, and recurrently, what interposed itself between a sense or a thought and its operation or expression. For writers seeking to give form to the operation of sense and thought itself, that interposition was traffic's main redeeming feature.

[1] On motor-accidents, see: Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Crash: Speed as Engine of Individuation', *Modernism/Modernity* 6:1 (1999), 1-49; Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
[2] Robert Graves, 'The Future of Poetry' (1926), in *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), pp. 51-59 (p. 58).
[3] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 45.
[4] Rudolph de Cordova, 'The Most Popular Pictures', *The Strand Magazine* 21:123 (1901), 242-51 (pp. 248-49).
[5] Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism', in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud, vol. xiv (72-103), p. 91.
[6] *Report of the Royal commission appointed to inquire into and report upon the means of locomotion and transport in London* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1905).
[7] Joseph Conrad, *Chance*, ed. Martin Ray Oxford: (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 179-80.
[8] John Gould Fletcher, 'London Excursion', *The Egoist* 14:1 (Wednesday 15 July 1914), 275-276.
[9] Ian Hacking, '*Automatisme Ambulatoire*: Fugue, Hysteria, and Gender at the Turn of the Century', *Modernism/Modernity* 3.2 (1996), 31-43.
[10] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 3.
[11] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 4.
[12] Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, ed. Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.
[13] *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, p. 8.
[14] Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 185.
[15] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), pp. 5-6.
[16] *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 127.
[17] Lynden Macassey, 'The Pedestrian', *The Times* (22 December 1924), p. 11.
[18] Anon., 'The Third Condition', *The Times* (22 April 1927), p. 13.
[19] Richard Hornsey, '"He who thinks, in modern traffic, is lost": Automation and the Pedestrian Rhythms of Interwar London', in Tim Edensor (ed.) *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
[20] Anon., 'Legs and Wheels', *The Times* (2 April 1927), p. 13.
[21] *The Voyage Out*, p. 10.
[22] James Wood, 'Virginia Woolf's Forgetful Selves', in *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader*, ed. Francine Prose (New York: Harcourt, 2003), 93-96 (p. 93).
[23] Wyndham Lewis, *The Apes of God* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 638.
[24] Wyndham Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (London: Arthur Press, 1930), p. 10.
[25] Patrick Hamilton, *Twenty-Thousand Streets Under the Sky* (London: Random House, 2011), p. 196; p. 453.
[26] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 217-251 (pp. 240-41).
[27] Georg Simmel, *Soziologie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1908), pp. 650-651 [my translation].
[28] Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 152-196 (p. 171).
[29] Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *World Clothing and Fashion: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Social Influence* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 105.
[30] Selwyn Weston, 'The Failure', *The Freewoman* 11:1 (1 February 1912), p. 210.
[31] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 231.
[32] James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 43.
[33] Virginia Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1934), pp. 5-6.
[34] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 267.

[35] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 203.